

By Neal Goswami, Bennington Banner

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vermont, questioned the wisdom Thursday of boosting American forces in Afghanistan while on a Congressional trip to Pakistan.

Speaking with reporters by telephone from Islamabad, Pakistan, Welch praised President Barack Obama's "cautious" approach on whether to send as many as 40,000 additional U.S. troops to the region -- even as critics of the president's approach become more vocal.

"I think that makes sense to be as careful as President Obama appears to be," Welch said.

Welch is on a congressional delegation organized by the Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs. Welch and other members of Congress arrived in Pakistan on Tuesday and will depart Saturday.

The president must take appropriate time to define the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and to define an exit strategy, Welch said. He said spending time on the ground in Pakistan is helping him understand the complexity of the situation and the region.

Additional troops will not solve many of the fundamental challenges facing the Obama administration, Welch said. Rather, the solution in Afghanistan, a country rife with political issues and corruption, will best be settled through diplomacy, according to Welch. He said he worries the U.S. will become too involved in nation-building in Afghanistan, at significant expense to U.S. taxpayers and costing more American servicemen and women their lives.

"I do oppose nation-building. I don't think that's a wise strategy," Welch said. "I have been and remain a skeptic. It's hard for me to see how 40,000 more troops is going to be a significant factor in changing the [President Hamid] Karzai government."

Welch said sending additional troops requested by U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of international troops in Afghanistan, will commit U.S. forces for at least 10 to 14 more years in Afghanistan and cost American taxpayers about \$800 billion, "with no guarantee of success."

The U.S. military has had success battling al-Qaida in the region using unmanned drones, Welch said. He suggested military success could be achieved without thousands of additional troops.

"There's another way to proceed and I think that's what the president is struggling with," he said. "Do we do nation-building ... or do we have a more targeted approach that focuses on al-Qaida?"

The trip has included meetings with the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani, Interior Minister Rehman Malik and military officials. Welch said the meetings are helping to explain a complex situation in Pakistan and that country's relationship with the U.S.

"Pakistan is incredibly important to national security," Welch said. "It's also extremely important ... to a successful resolution in Afghanistan."

The Pakistani military is becoming increasingly more aggressive in battling an insurgency in Pakistan's lawless border region with Afghanistan. He said there is an "uneasy cooperation" between the U.S. military and the Pakistani government about stifling a Pakistani faction of the Taliban as well as al-Qaida operatives in Pakistan.

It is "unspoken but apparently understood" that U.S. drones can identify and pursue Taliban and al-Qaida targets, Welch said. "The Pakistanis are very proud and independent and want to solve their own problems," he said.

But Pakistan has been less helpful in dealing with a separate Taliban faction in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government has "basically made an agreement: 'You don't bother us and we won't bother you,'" Welch said.

According to Welch, an unresolved territorial battle between Pakistan and India over Kashmir has led to Pakistan's reluctance to take on the Afghan Taliban because Pakistani officials see the Afghan Taliban as a potential ally against India. Pakistan will have no use for the Afghan Taliban if the Kashmir dispute is settled.

Meanwhile, Pakistanis are experiencing serious challenges because of the insurgency. Bombings in the northern city of Peshawar, visited this week by the Congressional delegation, are on the rise, including one Thursday. Welch said many officials believe the bombings are an attempt to discourage the Pakistani military from carrying out operations against insurgents in the northern border territory.

As a result, Welch said parents are apprehensive about sending their children to school. Most kids in the region have not attended school for the past three weeks, he said.

However, the Pakistani military is gaining respect among the citizenry because of its efforts against the insurgency, according to Welch. Pakistanis have long been suspicious of the Pakistani military because it was not controlled by a civilian government, he said.